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Montgomery budget faces test as council sets Thursday vote

Spending plan likely to include cuts to libraries, transportation

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

The budget that the Montgomery County Council is likely to approve Thursday will include tax increases, large cuts to libraries and transportation, and layoffs of government employees.

The council will reach a fiscal 2011 budget agreement in a straw vote Thursday and formalize that agreement May 27.

The budget agreement is expected to reduce funding for the county's libraries and transportation each by about a fourth.

The budget also is likely to take about 15 percent from recreation and 15 percent from parks and planning, along with roughly 10 percent from Health and Human Services and 8 percent from transit services.

The county's fire and rescue service is expected to take about a 3 percent cut, while police could lose about 5 percent of their funding.

These are roughly the same percentages that County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) proposed in his \$4.3 billion spending plan.

Councilman Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown said Tuesday that he wished the council could have done more this year to address the county's structural budget deficit.

Despite some early starts, the council retreated Monday from plans to merge the county's parks police with its county police force — a move that officials had estimated could eventually save \$2 million.

Instead, the council chose to establish a committee to study the issue.

In the end, the council decided the merger was too rushed, and not properly thought out. They supported a merger of the dispatch functions for both police forces.

The council also approved, on a 7-1 vote, a commission Tuesday that would study the restructuring of county government and offer a report to the council. Councilman Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac proposed the commission.

Knapp opposed the commission and Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park abstained.

Both said they were concerned that the commission would not lead to any actual changes in government spending or structure.

As of Tuesday, the county's Management and Fiscal Policy Committee was in support of five days of furloughs for all government employees, including Montgomery County Public schools employees, said

Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg, who chairs the committee.

Trachtenberg (D-At large) of North Bethesda said the full council will determine what form the furloughs will take, but said the committee seemed to support a progressive structure, which would make higher paid employees take more days of unpaid leave.

The council also took a straw vote Tuesday in support of repealing the so-called "ghost COLAs," which Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg has said would give government employees retirement benefits based on raises they never received.

The benefit calculates pension payments for some employees factoring in cost-of-living pay increases in fiscal 2010 that were not given. The agreement was a compromise from employees in lieu of the pay increases.

Leggett supported the repeal of the provision in an addendum to his fiscal 2011 budget proposal.